

London Borough of Redbridge Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC054181
Inspection date	08/07/2010
Inspector	Sean White / Rosemary Chapman
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	16/05/2006

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a local authority adoption agency that undertakes, or makes arrangements for all statutory adoption work.

The service recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adopters; it also matches and places children with families, and provides support for anyone affected by adoption. This includes birth records counselling. Arrangements for support and counselling for birth families is through an arrangement with an independent adoption support agency.

The service is managed in the Children Living Away from Home section of the authority.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

This agency is conscientiously motivated to meeting the needs of children placed for adoption. It is developing an efficient and coordinated approach to recruiting the most suitable families and is addressing the challenges it has faced in recent times.

Until very recently the agency was struggling to recruit sufficient adopters, and the processes in place to assess them were somewhat limited in detail and rigour. Current practice, however, has overcome many of these issues and there is a more focused approach.

Support for families is strong, with a clear commitment to ensuring that services are geared towards meeting the needs of all people affected by adoption.

The agency continues to struggle in its approach to maintaining children's heritage. Life-story work is not well coordinated or organised and timeliness is a significant issue. There has been limited training in this particular area of work and quality of life-story books is variable.

Management absences in recent times have left the agency with problems of leadership and direction. This, however, is being addressed with some energy and input into organisational matters and is bearing fruit. There is a strong underpinning commitment to diversity and equality issues that is informing the new direction of the service, along with the managerial motivation to raise standards and practice.

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the first inspection of this agency by Ofsted.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

This is an agency that puts the safety and welfare of children placed for adoption at the forefront of its activities and endeavours to meet their wide range of complex needs, many of which necessitate an understanding of diversity and commitment to equality.

There is a recruitment strategy in place and recently increased recruitment resources; this has enabled the agency to attract more applicants. The written strategy, however, is somewhat limited in scope and in the recent past there have been few domestic adopters approved by the service. Inter-country assessments are having a disproportionate impact on agency resources. Good collaborative working with consortium members ensures that there is scope for finding suitable families.

The assessments of prospective adopters are detailed, thorough and analytical. This level of rigour has only been achieved recently, however; in the recent past the approach was not as focused and crucial areas were not addressed comprehensively. The preparation courses are well organised which enables prospective adopters to undertake the process from an informed position. However, the agency does not invite applications to adopt until after the preparation groups.

Every effort is made to ensure that adopters are fully informed about the needs and circumstances of children being considered for a match. There is good medical input from the agency ensuring that children's health needs are fully explored and documented. Children's permanence reports are somewhat inconsistent however, which could result in crucial information not being available in some instances.

A suitably constituted and well-managed adoption panel brings a focused and rigorous approach to its duties. The business brought before it is given detailed scrutiny and recommendations are only made when the members are satisfied that they have all required information available. There is also a clear focus on quality control that helps the agency to improve practice. The panel is well administered and managed but the minutes of proceedings are limited in scope and content. Decisions, nevertheless, are made in a timely way by a committed and conscientious agency decision maker. The panel, which is also constituted as a fostering panel, has, on occasions, demonstrated some confusion between its two functions, although this

has not had any detrimental effect on recommendations made or decisions reached.

There are robust staff recruitment practices in place and this ensures only the most suitable people are employed in the agency. The manager and staff demonstrate knowledge, skill and understanding of adoption and children's social care. They are experienced and fully qualified to undertake their duties and responsibilities, and demonstrate enthusiasm and commitment. Service users are complimentary about the professionalism and sensitivity in their approach.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency has a good approach to the way it supports families and people affected by adoption. It works closely with colleagues from a range of disciplines to ensure that necessary resources are available and there are specialist facilities readily available to be accessed when necessary.

People affected by adoption are welcomed without prejudice and provided with a support service that is tailored to their needs and wishes.

Adoptive families are visited regularly and arrangements are in place for collaborative working with children's social workers that ensure there is available and well-coordinated support. This promotes and encourages adopters to be confident about their new families and optimistic about the future. This includes children placed in other areas.

There have been no disruptions in recent time, which demonstrates that families are being assisted and supported positively in their adoption journey.

The agency benefits from a conscientious medical adviser who is available for consultation on all health issues associated with the children being adopted and who has improved timeliness in ensuring medicals are completed.

Legal advice is available at every panel and there is ready access by the agency to the legal section of the authority.

Other, specialist facilities are accessible to the agency providing a range of advice and input whenever this is required or necessary.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is inadequate.

The agency makes every effort to engage birth parents in planning for their child's adoption. In some instances this was clearly undertaken in an inclusive and focused way that ensured their views and wishes were considered in the planning and

matching process. However, there is poor recording in some cases that does not indicate that consultation with birth parents is considered.

The approach to maintaining children's heritage is not well organised and considerable delay is evident in many instances. Life-story work is not undertaken by agency social workers and direct work with children being considered for adoption is poorly coordinated. There has been limited training in this area although arrangements to undertake this are well advanced and imminent; this will provide opportunities to develop skills and expertise.

Life-story books are in place for some children but they are of variable quality and content. Expertise in writing later-life letters is not very advanced.

Birth parents are provided with opportunities to access independent support and counselling through a contract with a voluntary adoption support agency.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The agency operates within the scope of its Statement of Purpose, which is informed by, and in line with, policies and procedures. There is some detail missing from both the statement and the children's guides.

People who are interested in adoption are provided with an information pack that outlines the process and procedures of becoming an adoptive parent. It is clearly written and includes information from independent sources. Although adequate in most respects, there is some information not included that would assist people to understand more fully the agency's approach. Nevertheless it demonstrates a welcoming approach and addresses all members of the community.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Managers and staff of the agency demonstrate a clear commitment to non-discriminatory practice in all of its encounters with service users and the wider public; workers are fully cognisant of current thinking and practice in diversity issues. The service ensures that children's heritage and cultural needs are addressed when planning their adoption and prospective adopters are fully informed about the importance of children understanding their backgrounds.

The management of the service is beginning to show positive results following a period of challenge due to significant management absences in the past year and a half. The manager has developed a more dynamic approach to steering the service

through these challenges and has created a forward looking strategy that is focused on the overall improvement in performance of the agency. This is already bearing fruit.

Workers are supported, encouraged and enabled to undertake their duties and responsibilities in a way that focuses on the needs of children and their futures in adoptive placements. Systems are evolving that are having a positive impact on efficiency and quality assurance, and there are structures being planned that are aimed at further improvements.

There are some aspects of monitoring and quality management that are not very well maintained. Case files had essential details missing, some information was difficult to locate and the file auditing system is incomplete.

Recent approvals of adopters showed a lack of consistency in approach and there is some confusion regarding the organisation of checks and references; some checks were not pursued because of staff absence.

Workload management is undertaken with the needs of the service in mind and there is an equitable approach to allocation. Staffing resources, while adequate, do not provide for any increase in workload that might be forthcoming in the near future.

There is a positive approach to staff development and training. Resources are provided to enable workers to increase their skills and knowledge base and this includes service-specific training and specialised external events.

The administration of the service, overall, is reasonably efficient, although there are some shortfalls in respect of filing and file management that are not well organised. Children's case files are maintained, in the main, electronically; adopters files, while well constructed, have information missing.

Staff and panel members' files contained most required information, but some details are not in place. There are no photographs in panel members' files and one had no recruitment information.

The agency's premises are secure, accessible to the public and provide comfortable working conditions. There is sufficient equipment and resources are reasonably good.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations

2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
4	invite applications to become adopters prior to attendance at preparation groups (Regulation 24 The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)	01/09/2010

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- write the recruitment strategy in a way that demonstrates the agency's approach to recruiting sufficient adopters (NMS 2)
- ensure child permanence reports provide full information in a consistent way (NMS 5)
- make arrangements for adoption panel minutes to be accurate and informative (NMS 12)
- ensure that the wishes and feelings of birth parents are considered when planning for their child's adoption (NMS 7)
- make arrangements for information about a child's heritage and life-story work to be coordinated in a timely way (NMS 8)
- include all required information in the Statement of Purpose and children's guide (NMS 1)
- ensure procedures and systems for monitoring the service are efficient (NMS 17)
- ensure all required information is maintained in case files (NMS 25)
- make arrangements for case records to be monitored effectively (NMS 27)
- include all required information on panel members' records (NMS 28).